

Interview with Gary K. Davis, Earl Laurence Heacock, and Nancy Heacock in the Director's Office, NESDIS Office of Systems Development; J. Gordon Vaeth via telephone

Interviewer: Doria B. Grimes, Senior Analyst, Riverside Technology, Inc.

Davis: Gordon Vaeth, at the time, was one of Dave's Office Directors. Gordon was Systems Engineering. And then Gordon also ran the Office of Operations, and Larry ran the Office of Systems Development.

The cool thing about Dave was he got up and walked around. When he wanted to talk to you, it was just as likely as he would show up in your office totally unannounced, as it would be that he would call you down to his office. He never used that "rank has its privilege" type of thing. When he wanted to talk to you, he would always do it in what he thought was your comfort zone.

L. Heacock: He was unique to Washington, in one respect. Once NESDIS became a line item in the Commerce budget, he had to go and testify on Capitol Hill for his budget. And Dave earned the reputation of not padding a single thing, so that the Congressmen never tried to cut his budget.

Davis: They didn't question. Dave was like the E.F. Hutton of his time. When he talked, they'd listen. He had that "Honest Abe" type of thing.

L. Heacock: As someone who had to submit my budget to him, I know he did all the cutting at that point.

Davis: But one of the funniest things was he called Gordon Vaeth down to his office. In fact, it was his secretary. What was her name?

N. Heacock: Kitty Stepanek. She was followed by Connie Payne.

Davis: So Connie called down to Gordon and said, "Dave's got a couple questions for you." And Gordon wrote down the questions and he called me into this office and said, "Dave has got these questions." So I started writing them on the board, and Gordon just naturally thought Dave was going to show up in his office, and we had it all written down on this nice white board. Then we got this phone call from Connie Payne that said that Dave was in a real rush. He had to go downtown, and wanted to see us in his office. Well, Gordon had this look on his face because the white board was attached to the wall. Literally, he just wanted to bring the board down to Dave's office because he knew Dave would really appreciate the work that was done. So I looked at Gordon and said, "You know something. It probably wouldn't be too bad if you called down to Connie and said, 'I understand that Dave is in a rush to go downtown, but it would sure be easier if he came up to our office. He did. No questions asked. He never wanted to put somebody ill at ease."

Grimes: This was all in Suitland?

Davis: This was all in Suitland, back in FB4.

Grimes: In the Verner Suomi papers, I found that even after Dave retired, he testified on behalf of NOAA for the NOAA budget in front of the Senate¹.

Davis: That's because Dave had that good a reputation with the Senate.

Dave also hired both Larry and myself on different occasions --- probably ten years apart.

N. Heacock: He hired Larry in 1961, and he reported for duty in March 1962.

Davis: And I started in 74. So it was 12 years later. But I can guarantee, and I never rehearsed this or talked to Larry that the interviews went basically the same way. Dave basically asked you why you wanted to come to work, and why you thought this job would be enticing to you, and he just let you talk. And it was all said and done.

L. Heacock: Who was it who came over to France, when we were there? And David said, "If you see Larry Heacock, I am creating a new Office of Systems Development and I think he would be a good director for it. I know. It was the guy from Philco Ford.

Davis: While Larry is remembering his name, do you have enough history?

Grimes: Pretty much. The question I have concerns the transfer of people to Wisconsin. Verner Suomi was interviewed for the AMS Oral History Project and Dave Johnson was one of the interviewers. I was reading the transcript, and he was talking about, on a handshake, they sent seven people up to Wisconsin. They were feds. What precipitated that and when was that? It was so vague. What brought that about and why did they have to go to Wisconsin?

Davis: They were aligned with the University of Wisconsin, which I believe was called SSEC.

Larry Heacock: Space Science and Engineering Center.

Davis: Dave started the Cooperative Institute, but NOAA and the Space Science and Engineering Center organization at the University of Wisconsin basically did this. So Suomi was at the University of Wisconsin, and Suomi was teaching many of the people. In fact, guys like Louis Uccellini and Paul Menzel, actually, were taught by Suomi out at Wisconsin. Then so Dave thought it would be

¹ Johnson, David S. **Statements of Dr.[sic] David Johnson, University Corporation for Atmospheric Research, and Dr. Verner Suomi, Professor of Meteorology, University of Wisconsin. Hearings before the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation United States Senate.. 98th, 1st session. NOAA Authorization (Y4.C 73/7: S. HRG. 98-78), March 14, 1983, p. 250-256. http://docs.lib.noaa.gov/rescue/TIROS_johnson/Hearings%201983.pdf**

very, very prudent to start a small arm of our Office of Research out in Wisconsin. That's when they decided to put 8 whatever...

Grimes: "Took 8 of his people from his lab and sent them to Madison²" ...on a handshake. No contract. Nothing.

L. Heacock: On a handshake. Right.

Davis: It was probably Bill Smith.

N. Heacock: It was Bill Smith.

L. Heacock: Bill Smith was the senior guy out there for a while.

Grimes: They stayed feds. They just worked on campus as part of this Cooperative Institute.

L. Heacock: It was an off-premise branch of the Satellite Center.

Davis: Dave just thought that having these people co-located with the brain power of the satellite research and development that was being done in Wisconsin would be beneficial. The average IQ of both agencies would go up.

Grimes: Do you still have people there?

Davis: Yes. To this day there is probably a group of 7 to 8 people. Today, they have more students. They have more post-docs, than they had at the beginning. But Paul Menzel, Larry McMillan, Charley Brewster (correction to original Suomi transcript to Charlie Bristor), John Liese.³

Davis: Menzel or Louis Uccellini could tell you who the original people were. Louis was actually a student there. Louis knew Suomi.

Grimes: Suomi who passed in 1995. Johnson passed in 2004.

Then there was the 1994 Verner E. Suomi Lecture⁴ at the University of Wisconsin and Dave was the keynote speaker. Verner Suomi was ailing at the time and it was published in the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. It has a photo of Elbert W. (Joe) Friday, Zou Jingmeng, Verner Suomi, and G. O. P. Obasi.

² Transcript. AMS Oral History Interview with Dr. Verner Suomi, March 20, April 20, May 14, 1994, p. 22 http://library.ssec.wisc.edu/SuomiWebsite/SuomiImages/scanned%20documents/Suomi_OralHistory.pdf

³ In 1977, the original six NOAA people sent to the University of Wisconsin-Madison were William L. Smith, Christopher Hayden, Hugh Howell, Frederick Nagle, David Small, Harold Woolf – source William L. Smith.

⁴ Johnson, David S. **Evolution of the U.S. Meteorological Satellite Program: Some Reminiscences.** (1994 Verner E. Suomi Lecture) Boston, MA: Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society, Vol. 75, no. 9, September 1994, pp. 1705-1708. http://docs.lib.noaa.gov/rescue/TIROS_johnson/199409evolution_amsb.pdf

Grimes: It would be nice to have just the two of them together.

Davis: As I showed you up on the 8th floor, we've got a very good picture of Dave. Unfortunately, when that happened, Dave was really ailing.

N. Heacock: Do you want the original one we used for the obit? It's up on Larry's bookcase. You can have it. I remember where that was taken. We were sitting at a little restaurant right by Lake Geneva. We were having wine.

L. Heacock: I "photo shopped" it to get it down to just Dave. I had it digitally, but my computer was completely wiped out.

I had the blessing that my career was spent during the "Golden Age of Space". If you had a good project, it would get funded.

Grimes: A program that was funding was called ARPA⁵ to pursue deserving satellite projects.

L. Heacock: And Congress also. Even NASA didn't have any problems getting money in those days.

Grimes: In 1961, President Kennedy requested "an additional 75 million dollars, of which 53 million dollars is for the Weather Bureau [that] will help give us at the earliest possible time a satellite system for world-wide weather observations."⁶ Dave Johnson wrote, "It is interesting to note that the addition of these funds for the satellites more than doubled the Weather Bureau budget at that time."⁷

He was also active in the Weather Bureau Modernization Program. Would you recommend my talking to someone about that?

Davis: The guys who would know that most about that are Hallgren⁸ and Joe Friday.

N. Heacock: He was in an apartment which was very nice. I came to realize when you watch over someone, I was finding out that he couldn't come down the steps. I said, "Dave, you've got to get out of here. You've got to get a place with an elevator." So Kitty and I went around to all the apartments and put his name in. It was really interesting in this one place. They said that there was a three year waiting list. I am convinced that God will provide the apartment when it is necessary. A month later everyone turned down the apartment. There were sailboats out front, so he could hear the rigging. That was on Americana. Then, before he ever got sick, he put money down on this retirement apartment, Bay Woods, a very, very nice one. That's where he lived when he died.

⁵ Advanced Research Projects Agency

⁶ **Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961-63.** 3 vols. Washington: GPO, 1962-64, May 25, 1961, pp. 403-405. Reprint.

http://docs.lib.noaa.gov/rescue/TIROS_newspaper_clippings_docs/1961space_jfk_papers_v3.pdf

⁷ Johnson, op. cit. p. 1706.

⁸ Richard E. Hallgren

Davis: In November, they are doing a 50th anniversary of the Explorer satellite out in Wisconsin and we are going to do a tribute to Suomi as well as Dave.

Gordon Vaeth: I think this is very appropriate. Suomi is too little recognized.

Davis: Some of the clippings, she has preserved them in acid-free mylar. Now she is trying to put together a web site that mirrors the website that is being done for Verner Suomi. The headlines on the Verner Suomi website are: History, Timeline, Awards, Writings, Photos. We are trying to do the same for Dave. So, I got Larry and Nancy here talking to Doria. I am asking her to talk to Hallgren and Joe Friday. You and Harold might be two of the best who can talk about Dave's professional career and anecdotes. Time it for next week or so.

Gordon Vaeth: [Provides contact information for Harold Yates]

Davis: I'll never forget. I'll tell you one story about Mr. Vaeth. We were having a launch and Jack Williams, who was the editor of the weather page in USA Today, came out to view the launch. And I think Tom Pyke was our director then. And Jack Williams came out to do a story on the weather satellite launch. And the next day when they opened up the paper, it was a story about airships and balloons ---without a mention of launch. What happened was Gordon short-circuited the article. Jack Williams saw Gordon in the hall. Went into Gordon's office, and Gordon enthralled him with his stories of Amelia Earhart and airships and balloons.

Vaeth: I think it's great you are able to do something for Dave. As you know, I have a very, very high regard for him. I'm very happy about all that.